

Surára,
Pakidái

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4. Life Cycle

842 a) Birth control

862 The number of children among both the Surára and the
[63] Pakidái is very small; no woman has more than three at most.
[65] Aside from the high infant mortality rate as a result of the lack
of hygiene, however, this is bound up with the fact that the women
must observe an interval of at least three years after each birth,
as long as a child is fed with mother's milk, which, in the
opinion of these Indians, prevents conception to a considerable
842 extent. If a woman nevertheless becomes pregnant, the medicine
847 men know how to prepare an abortive medicine from plant juices.
The reason for birth control, I was told, is that if a child were
born during the period of restriction, it would not be healthy and
able to cope with life, because the mother's body would still be
too weak.

843 b) Food taboos during pregnancy

Before the birth the mother must observe many food taboos
in order not to harm her child. Her diet then consists primarily
of the tender meat of the mutum (Crax sp.), cooked bananas,
manioc flat-cakes, and a drink that is made from the nourishing,
very oily pupunha fruits. If she were to eat wild-pig meat, for
example, the child would be born dead; the meat of the pirarucu
(Osteoglossidae, the largest fresh-water fish), which carries inside
it the bad breath of the river, would make it blind, and parrot
meat would make it cry constantly later on.

844 c) Birth

While giving birth, the woman kneels in front of a tree
and embraces the trunk with both arms. The ground has been
sprinkled with water beforehand so that it is slimy and soft.
Several female members of the tribe assist the woman in labor.
After the birth, two women, each with a cotton thread, tie off
the umbilical cord, and a third one then bites it off. The father

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755 hopping, etc. The other members of the tribe pay no attention
884 to such prayers and magic performances. Only the chiefs and
P6 their student helpers sometimes listen more carefully. Then it
sometimes happened that Hewemão would shake his head and
tell me that this or that man was praying all wrong, he had un-
doubtedly not paid sufficient attention during the lessons. If he
notes such deficiencies often, it may happen that he will request
the man in question to take part in another two-month training
course in order to increase his knowledge.

756 There is evidence that this type of training, in similar
171 form, occurs among the Jívaro, where prospective shamans
receive instruction for one month, in the course of which the
neophyte must also fast and drink various drugs, including tobacco
juice and cayapi. The training costs, however, are very high (329).

329. Stirling, 1938, pp. 117/18.

756 For the young Surára and Pakidái men the instruction is free, to be
884 sure, but mandatory.

834 j) Sex life
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The behavior of the sexes toward each other in public is
extraordinarily decent. Kisses, embraces, or other manifestations
of affection are unknown to them. Physical demonstrations of
love are carried out in the forest, away from the maloka, or in the
dark of night when it is assumed that the other members of the
tribe are sleeping. Hunting expeditions also offer a favorable
opportunity, for the wife occasionally accompanies her husband.
[595] Since some men have two wives, they go hunting in turn with
the first and with the second.

• 843 If a woman is pregnant, she is supposed to come together
837 frequently with other men, for it is believed that only through
this can her child become stronger. It must occur in all secrecy,
[593] however, for if her husband surprises her during coitus with a
lover, he challenges the latter to a stick duel, and she herself will
be abused by him (330).

330. Becher, 1959, p. 162.

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/113 cont. /

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between two men embracing each other, which is performed in a sitting position (see p. 233); the tug of war (see p. 244); and the throwing of wet earth at one another (see p. 244).

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IX. Myths and Legends

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The following myths and legends were told me by the Surára chief Hewemão:

The Creation of the Yanonámi

The earth already existed and was full of plants and animals, but as yet was without human beings. But one day the first man, Uruhí, came out of the leg of the xiapó, a small bird with black and yellow feathers similar to the japim. A short time later the bird-leg gave birth to a second man, then a third, a fourth, and finally a woman, Petá. These four men and the woman lived together in perfect harmony. Petá, to be sure, was the wife of Uruhí, the first-born, but the other three brothers also had the right to have sexual intercourse with her (552).

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552. Among the Surára and Pakidái, the younger, unmarried brothers likewise have the right to have sexual intercourse with the wives of their elder brothers. Moreover, the members of both tribes believe that a woman is able to have strong children only if she has frequent intercourse with other men during her pregnancy.

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After a year Petá gave birth to a strong, healthy boy who grew rapidly and called all four men "father" (553). The boy's

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553. The Surára and Pakidái children also call the unmarried brother of their father, not uncle, but likewise father.

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the male as continuing in importance not only after conception—at which stage, in our own positivist scientific view, the male role ceases to count—but for a certain period after the actual birth. The male, the cause, is still in the picture, according to the Indian mind, when the mother and child are living a normal life.

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I had known other native peoples, and in regard to these Indian beliefs on the subject of childbirth, Luis Antonio confirmed what had already come to my knowledge.

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'In order for the birth to be a success,' he told me, 'when the wife is five months gone, the husband should stop eating peccary, snake or *caribe* (the name given in Venezuela to the carnivorous fish known in Brazil as *piranha*), and the flesh of any animal of an aggressive nature.' (Here, principles of hygiene were mingled with elements of magic, as happens also in the more advanced religions.)

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'Then, before the birth, during the birth and after, the man must stay in the hammock without stirring, because any strain on his part, or any mishap that came his way, would affect the child and might have dire results.'

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The explanation sounds quite normal and natural once one admits the principle of continued causation in the man, the woman being regarded simply as a means. In fact there is no need for her to obey the injunction to stay in the hammock. She will continue her daily round until she feels 'something break inside her'. Then, with the midwife, she will hurry to the appointed place on the river-bank.

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I once had the chance of being present at a birth. I was with the Taurepan Indians of the Gran Sabana, and I watched hidden behind a cluster of Mauritius palm, where I could follow the principal stages of the proceedings. The woman, with her head tilted back, was seated on the clay bank in a sort of arm-chair shaped hollow which had been scooped out—whether naturally or made for the purpose I do not know. The midwife knelt at her feet, waiting. For some time both remained in this position. The woman kept giving little cries—but not really cries of pain. After a brief labour, the mother uttered one long howl which sounded to me like an 'u...u...uh' of rapture, and the midwife rose to her feet, holding up a tiny, mottled infant head downwards by the heels.

Still holding the baby by the feet, the old lady washed him in the river—with exactly the motions you might expect from a washerwoman giving the final rinsing to some heavy garment. I couldn't see the next step, but a few

CHAPTER II

THE DEMOGRAPHIC BASIS OF WARFARE, POLITICAL ALLIANCE, AND SETTLEMENT DYNAMICS¹

A. The Shortage of Women and Feuding

As outlined in the Introduction, the shortage of women among the Yanomamö has far-reaching consequences in almost every aspect of their social organization. In this chapter I will establish the general functional relationship between this demographic fact and the dynamics of village feuding, village splitting, and village re-location. These phenomena will be discussed in more detail in later chapters, particularly with reference to the kinship system.

The Yanomamö practice male and female infanticide.

There are a number of reasons accounting for this practice.

First, young couples do not relish the prospect of a long period of celibacy that pregnancy and lactation taboos impose on them. From the time a woman discovers she is pregnant until the time she weans her child, she is not allowed to have sexual relations. The time period involved varies from

TEXT CONTINUED ON PAGE 55

¹The data discussed in this and subsequent chapters are drawn from the 5 villages, listed in Table I, in which I spent most of my time. The historical and genealogical relationships of these villages are given later in the text. My generalizations on Yanomamö culture and social organization are applicable to those groups occupying the Upper Orinoco and the Mavaca River basin. (See Map B, next page.)

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I insisted that she share her food with the child, he ate it ravenously. In short, she was letting the baby die slowly of starvation. I have similar accounts from missionaries who have also witnessed cases such as this.

Male babies are preferred because they will grow up to be warriors and hunters. Most men make known their wishes to have a son—even to the point of insinuating that the wife ought to deliver a male or suffer the consequences. This is always done in a subtle way, usually by displaying signs of anger or resentment at the thought of having a daughter that constantly eats without being potentially an economic asset or guardian of the village. Many women will kill a female baby just to avoid disappointing their husbands. The Yanomamö also practice abortion in a very crude but effective way. The pregnant woman will lie on her back and have a friend jump on her belly to rupture the amnion. Sometimes abortions are effected because the woman does not want to kill the baby after it is born. In other cases a man will order his wife to abort if he suspects that somebody else conceived the child.

Several techniques are used to kill a newborn child. The most common method is to strangle it with a vine so as not to touch it physically. Another common method is to place a stick across the child's neck and stand on both ends of it until it chokes. In some cases the child is not given the stimulus to breathe and is simply abandoned. Finally, some women throw the child against a tree or on the ground and just abandon it without checking to see if it was killed by the injuries sustained. One of the New Tribes Missionaries discovered a female baby in 1964 that had been discarded in this fashion and brought her home with him. The baby's face was badly bruised on one side, but she survived. The missionary subsequently adopted her legally and is raising her in England.

The demographic result of the Yanomamö infanticide practices is that there is a shortage of females.¹³ This shortage of females, however slight, assumes greater proportions for a number of culturally determined reasons. That is, the shortage of women is even greater than statistics alone imply because of the practice of polygyny and because of taboos relating to sexual intercourse.

The village of Patanowä-teri, for example, has 122 males and only 90 females (see Table 3-3). But many (about 25 percent) of the politically important men in the village have two or more wives. Hence, many men have no wives. Polygyny, therefore, increases the women shortage because the available women are distributed unequally.

In addition to this, the Yanomamö have taboos against intercourse when a woman is pregnant or is nursing a child. The taboo is by no means followed to the strict letter, since children are nursed for three years or more—some men sheepishly admit having coitus with a lactating wife. Rerebawä, whose youngest child is about a year old, told me that he recently tried to persuade his wife to make love. He added: "She told me to go take some drugs and chant to my forest spirits; she is still 'stingy' with her vagina." Hence there is considerable concern within the village over the acquisition and possession of

¹³The frequency of female infanticide must be considerably higher than the statistics in Table 3-3 imply, since warfare results in the death of more men than women. This shows up in the age and sex distribution: There are more males in the younger age categories than females because of the infanticide preferences. As the males get older, however, they are more liable to death in warfare, resulting in a fairly even distribution of males and females in the thirty- to forty-year age interval. Finally, there are more old women than old men, also reflecting the higher male mortality due to warfare. I have published more substantial data on Yanomamö demography in Neel and Chagnon, 1968.